

SCURVY IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

Against this background one disease stands out in strong relief, namely *bu'sanu* or "the stinking disease." Although not hitherto identified all the available clues point to *bu'sanu* as being the ancient word for scurvy. Here the first point that is important is one of placing, for, in the therapeutic texts, the prescriptions and incantations for *bu'sanu* are found in the second of the two Tablets which concern the teeth. This is altogether suitable since in scurvy the gums and teeth are both specifically involved, the gums becoming swollen, "spongy," and covered in fungating sores, and the teeth loosening and, in advanced cases, falling out. The seriousness of the condition may be gauged by the fact that three of the four columns of the Tablet are concerned with it, and one of the incantations, addressed to the personified disease, describes how he has attacked the glands of the mouth and the tongue, whereupon the demon finally centralises his attack "between the teeth." The name itself, from a verb *ba'asu*, "to be evil-smelling," is an additional pointer to the diagnosis, and every support comes from the fact that a "medicine," also called *bu'sanu*, was prescribed as a cure for the disease of the same name.

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